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No Assassinations Authorized, White House Says

Spokesman Avoids Answering Queries on Reagan's Knowledge of Casey's Covert Activities

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The White House, reacting to a published account of U.S. involvement in a covert operation to kill a prominent Lebanese Shiite leader, said yesterday that President Reagan had never authorized that or any other assassination attempt.

"The president never did, never has and never will authorize assassinations," said White House spokesman Marlin Fitzwater.

Fitzwater, like other administration spokesmen yesterday, sought to avoid answering questions regarding what Reagan knew about the covert activities of the late CIA director William J. Casey.

He refused to be drawn into a discussion of whether Reagan had signed a National Security Decision Directive or a separate "finding" (a presidential authorization for a covert activity) that set in motion actions leading to the assassination attempt.

Bob Woodward, The Washington Post's assistant managing editor for investigations, writes in a new book about the Central Intelligence Agency that Casey had arranged privately with the Saudi intelligence service to assassinate Sheik Mohammed Hussein Fadlallah, the main spiritual leader of the extremist Shiite group, Hezbollah.

The first 500,000 copies of the book, "Veil: The Secret Wars of the CIA, 1981-1987," went on sale yesterday.

Central Intelligence Agency spokeswoman Sharon Foster said yesterday, "We don't see any value in debating the authenticity of the book, so we're not making any statements."

One of Woodward's other major disclosures in the book was that Casey, just before dying last spring, had told him that he knew of the diversion of funds to U.S.-backed Nicaraguan rebels from the secret sale of U.S. arms to Iran. Casey's widow, Sophia, has denied that her husband said such a thing to Woodward.

Yesterday, Rep. Lee H. Hamilton (D-Ind.), chairman of the House Iran-contra investigating panel, said he believed that Casey not only knew of the diversion but was "a primary actor" in arranging for it.

Sen. Daniel K. Inouye (D-Hawaii), chairman of the counterpart Senate committee, said he would not be surprised if Casey had known, but added, "We'll never know because he's no longer with us."

Shortly before the attempt on Fadlallah's life, Reagan had signed a finding authorizing the CIA to train three Lebanese five-man units for preemptive strikes against terrorists.

When the CIA resisted using the units, Woodward wrote, Casey went "off the books" and arranged privately for the Saudis to take effective control of the operation without telling anyone.

On March 8, 1985, a car bomb exploded 50 yards from the apartment building where Fadlallah lives in a Beirut suburb, killing 80 persons and wounding 200. Fadlallah escaped without injury.

The Saudi government has vehemently denied Woodward's account of its involvement in the bid to kill the Shiite leader.

Former and present Senate and House leaders of the intelligence oversight committees reacted cautiously yesterday to Woodward's account of how Casey had sought to circumvent their panels.

Several echoed the comment of Sen. Patrick J. Leahy (D-Vt.), former vice chairman of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, who said through an aide that he wanted to read the entire book before making any detailed comment.

Senate committee Chairman David L. Boren (D-Okla.) issued a statement saying he did not think it "appropriate" to comment on specific allegations in the book. Boren said he felt that the important issue now, growing out of the Iran-contra affair and Casey's controversial CIA stewardship, is to establish better

congressional oversight of the agency's covert activities.

He said the Senate Rules and Administration Committee last week approved creation of an independent financial unit within the intelligence panel to audit CIA covert activities as part of a general effort to strengthen oversight. This effort will include regular, in-depth review of all covert operations.

The auditing unit, involving three or four persons, was set up to stave off legislation introduced by Sen. John Glenn (D-Ohio) that provides for the General Accounting Office, a congressional investigating body, to conduct outside probes of CIA covert activities, according to Senate intelligence sources.

Boren said the committee also adopted rules to stop unauthorized disclosures to the news media about CIA covert activities, an issue that caused deep distrust between Casey and the intelligence panels throughout most of his tenure as CIA director.

Boren has been eager to repair the damage and to establish a good working relationship with the new CIA director, William H. Webster. He said the committee had made "great strides" in reestablishing trust between the agency and his committee and that this had led to "a very candid sharing of sensitive information."

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